
Citation:

Irving, H (2019) 'Propaganda Bestsellers': British Official War Books, 1941-46. In: The Concept of the Book: The production, progression and dissemination of information. Institute of English Studies, London. ISBN 978-0-9927257-4-7

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‘Propaganda Bestsellers’: British Official War Books, 1941-46

On Friday 28 March 1941, the British government caused a publishing sensation. The focus of attention was a short, unillustrated pamphlet, bound in a light blue cover, and decorated with the badge of the Royal Air Force. The pamphlet was entitled *The Battle of Britain, August-October 1940* and had been published by the Ministry of Information and the Stationery Office (HMSO) on behalf of the Air Ministry. According to excited newspaper reports, stocks of the 3 pence pamphlet were quickly depleted after (Can you specify that this pertains to price in this first instance?)pamphlet’s queues formed outside the HMSO (Should this be expanded in the first instance?) bookshop in London.¹ Records show that the initial print run of 50,000 copies was sold within a few hours. By the close of trading, another 300,000 copies had been placed on order and frantic efforts were being made to fulfil demand.² For at least a week after publication, commercial bookshops and newsagents carried notices explaining that no copies were available, while rumours of a ‘deluxe’ version abounded.³ When a revised version – replete with action photographs, explanatory diagrams and illustrated cover – appeared in mid-April 1941, it immediately sold 700,000 copies at 6d each (almost three times the 250,000 expected).⁴ By April 1942, there were 43 editions in 24 languages; over 6 million copies had been produced, and the text had been serialised by newspapers across the globe.⁵

There is growing interest in the role of pamphlets like *The Battle of Britain*. In two interlinked studies of the air battle’s public history, Garry Campion has argued that the pamphlet was a ‘propaganda masterstroke’ that helped ‘shape perceptions of the event as it is understood today’.⁶ The military historian Richard Overy agrees that the pamphlet ‘gave the conflict ... narrative shape’ and helped establish its legendary status.⁷ It is not the only example of its kind. Research undertaken as part of the project ‘A Publishing and Communication History of the Ministry of Information, 1939-46’ has demonstrated that books formed a significant part of Britain’s propaganda output. Having initially sought to promote and facilitate commercial publishing, *The Battle of Britain*’s success encouraged a more direct approach to production. *The Battle of Britain* became the first in a series of large-format illustrated pamphlets published on behalf of other government departments. Each of these ‘Official War Books’ dealt with a specific campaign or part of the war effort. Among the better-known examples are *Front Line*, *Ark Royal*, *The Battle of Egypt*, and *Build the Ships*. Around fifty Official War Books were produced between 1941 and 1946, and over 26 million were sold in the United Kingdom alone.⁸

The Official War Books were regarded as a great success. Robert Fraser (director of the Ministry of Information’s Publications Division, 1941-45), heralded the birth of ‘propaganda bestsellers’, while George Royds (the Ministry’s Controller of Production, 1941-1945) was proud that they had become ‘an established part of the country’s reading’.⁹ The books’ high sales figures are often cited as evidence

¹ *The Times*, ‘Battle of Britain a Best Seller’, 29 Mar 1941, p. 5; *Daily Mirror*, ‘“Battle of Britain” Sold Out in a Few Hours’, 29 Mar 1941, p. 5 and *Daily Mail*, ‘Not for Export!’, 29 Mar 1941, p. 3.

² Kew, The National Archives (TNA), STAT 14/226, Parrish to Plumbley, 28 Mar 1941 and AIR 19/258, Peck to Sinclair, 5 Apr 1941.

³ Sussex, Mass Observation Archive (MO), TC 20/3/E, V.W., ‘The Battle of Britain’, 4 Apr 1941.

⁴ *Sunday Express*, ‘Still Best Thriller’, 27 Apr 1941, p. 7.

⁵ TNA, STAT 14/226, ‘The Battle of Britain’, 9 Apr 1942.

⁶ Garry Campion, *The Good Fight: Battle of Britain Propaganda and the Few* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 280-6 and *The Battle of Britain, 1945-1965* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 92-95.

⁷ Richard Overy, *The Battle of Britain: Myth and Reality* (London, Penguin, 2010), p. 118.

⁸ TNA, INF 1/942, ‘Ministry of Information: Functions and Organisation as at 31 December 1944’, 31 Dec 1944, p. 6.

⁹ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, ‘Books and Pamphlets Programme’, 2 Dec 1941, p. 1 and INF 1/76, Royds, ‘Draft Submission to the Minister’, 23 Jun 1943.

to suggest that they influenced popular perceptions of the events they depicted.¹⁰ However, important questions about their influence have only partially been answered: it is not entirely clear what encouraged people to buy the Official War Books in such large numbers and the link between high sales and successful propaganda needs to be treated with care. This chapter will build upon existing literature to address both issues. It begins by reviewing *The Battle of Britain* and the ways in which it influenced later titles. The article then considers readership in greater detail. Using material produced by the Ministry of Information and the research organisation Mass Observation, it will demonstrate the importance of the government's publishing strategy before considering the extent to which success depended upon the notion of objectivity.

The Book Programme

Books had always been regarded as a possible medium for propaganda. The Ministry of Information's pre-war planners had identified publishing as a way to consolidate 'front line' publicity like radio broadcasts and film.¹¹ As early as June 1939, it was decided that the Ministry would publish 'a popular series of cheap books' should war be declared.¹² However, as I have written elsewhere, the failure to deliver a programme of pamphlets at the outbreak of the Second World War led to a new policy centred on the promotion and facilitation of commercially published work.¹³ It was not until 1941 that there was a shift back towards direct production. This was demonstrated by the creation of a new Publications Division under Robert 'Bob' Fraser (a former leader-writer for the *Daily Herald*) and J.M. 'Max' Parrish (a former editor at the publishing firm Collins) in March of that year. This was partly the result of an administrative review that had begun some six months earlier, but it also owed something to Parrish's involvement with *The Battle of Britain*.¹⁴

The idea for a pamphlet celebrating the RAF's defensive campaign against the *Luftwaffe* was formed inside the Air Ministry's Directorate of Public Relations during the late summer of 1940. It seems likely that the original idea came from Sir Richard Peck, who was responsible for public relations, and would have known that similar ideas were being pursued in other departments (the War Office was working on a pamphlet about the Dunkirk evacuation as part of a planned series to be called 'The Army at War').¹⁵ The pamphlet was to be published anonymously, but the writers were carefully chosen. Initial research was undertaken by the young Oxford historian Albert Goodwin and the results written-up by the thriller writer Hilary Aiden St George Saunders (who was better known by the pseudonyms 'Francis Beeding' and 'David Pilgrim').¹⁶ Saunders was given authority to consult operational plans; methodically combining these records with observational reportage and material gained from interviews with returning airmen. His aim was to '[clothe] the skeleton of facts ... with the flesh of incident'.¹⁷

¹⁰ Campion, *The Battle of Britain*, pp. 92-5 and Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, Pearson, 2004), pp. 211-12. See also David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London, Penguin, 2005), pp. 186-7 for the role of post-war reworking.

¹¹ TNA, INF 1/720, Minutes of a Meeting, 13 Apr 1939.

¹² TNA, INF 1/720, Minutes of a Meeting, 29 Jun 1939.

¹³ Henry Irving, 'Towards a "New Kind of Book": Publishing and the Ministry of Information, 1939-45', *Publishing History*, 75:1 (2016), 53-76. See also Valerie Holman, 'Carefully Concealed Connections: The Ministry of Information and British Publishing, 1939-46', *Book History*, 8 (2005), 197-226.

¹⁴ TNA, INF 1/123, [Parrish], 'Present Organisation', c. 15 Aug 1940 and OEPEC Paper No. 670, 'Publications Division', 5 Feb 1941.

¹⁵ Campion, *The Battle of Britain*, p. 93.

¹⁶ Campion, *The Good Fight*, p. 281.

¹⁷ Hilary Saunders, *Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!* (London, Macmillan, 1944), p. 10.

Adopting an accessible style that was somewhere ‘between a piece of journalism and a historical narrative’, Saunders introduced chapter headings to delineate the battle into separate phases.¹⁸ He began by ‘setting the scene’, then provided a detailed account of fighting between 8 August and 31 October, before ending with a rousing conclusion about those who ‘saved Britain’. The pamphlet repeatedly stressed that ‘Nothing like [the Battle of Britain] had been fought before in the history of mankind’.¹⁹ Saunders and Peck also agreed that the pamphlet should ‘leave all names out’ in order to show ‘the fighting from the human side’ and avoid glorifying individuals.²⁰ This would prove controversial, with Winston Churchill finding time to personally question the omission of Air Chief Sir Hugh Dowding’s name, however such narrative devices set *The Battle of Britain* apart from earlier examples of print propaganda.²¹ As a junior officer in the Directorate later recalled, the aim had been to create ‘an authentic account of the battle in [a] popular style’.²²

Parrish’s involvement began when the Ministry of Information was approached for editorial guidance. It was he who suggested that an illustrated version should be prepared and this appears to have been well-underway before the first edition hit the shelves (indeed, the poet Cecil Day-Lewis had been employed as a caption writer on 11 March).²³ The Ministry of Information also helped to develop a detailed publicity strategy. On Wednesday 26 March, a detailed press handout was circulated to journalists at the Ministry’s headquarters at Senate House, with newspapers encouraged to publish feature articles about the book to coincide with publication. Broadsheet and tabloid newspapers alike would claim that story was being told ‘for the first time’.²⁴ The Ministry also arranged for an item about the pamphlet to be included in the BBC’s news bulletins at 9 p.m. on Thursday evening and 7 a.m. on Friday morning.²⁵

Image 1: *The Battle of Britain, August-October 1940 An Air Ministry Account of the Great Days from 8th August-31st October, 1940* (London: HMSO, [1941]) [31 p.]

This strategy helped to foster a sense of excitement surrounding the pamphlet’s release. The mass-circulation *Daily Express* – read by almost 20 per cent of the population – gave a particularly animated account that began with a description of Churchill standing in a ‘big, bare control room with his eyes glued to the map stretched on the wall before him’.²⁶ The same paper, which was owned by Lord Beaverbrook (the Minister of Aircraft Production during the battle), announced it would serialise ‘this wonderful story of British resistance’ after the HMSO bookshop sold out.²⁷ The seven part serialisation ran until Wednesday 9 April 1941.²⁸ Such coverage encouraged others to join in. The BBC reworked the pamphlet into a dramatic radio play that was broadcast on 8 May, the National Institute of the Blind produced a Braille version, Penguin published an illustrated children’s version under the Puffin

¹⁸ Saunders, *Pioneers!*, p. 7.

¹⁹ *The Battle of Britain* (London, 1941), p. 4.

²⁰ TNA, AIR 19/258, Peck to Sinclair, 5 Apr 1941.

²¹ For an account of this controversy see Campion, *The Battle of Britain*, pp. 95-8.

²² Dame Felicity Peake quoted in Campion, *The Battle of Britain*, p. 92.

²³ Sean Day-Lewis, *C. Day-Lewis: An English Literary Life* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), p. 136 and *The Times*, ‘Mr Max Parrish’, 3 Mar 1970, p. 2. The illustrated version was completed on the day the text-only version was published, see TNA, STAT, 14/226, Parrish to Plumbley, 28 Mar 1941.

²⁴ See *Daily Express*, ‘Achtung, Schpitfeuer!’, 28 Mar 1941, p. 4; *Daily Mail*, ‘All We Saw were Vapour Trails’, 28 Mar 1941, p. 2; and *The Times*, ‘The Battle of Britain’, 28 Mar 1941, p. 5 for examples of feature articles.

²⁵ TNA, STAT 14/226, [Parrish], ‘The Battle of Britain: Distribution and Publicity Arrangements’, 4 Apr 1941.

²⁶ *Daily Express*, ‘Achtung, Schpitfeuer!’, 28 Mar 1941, p. 4.

²⁷ *Daily Express*, ‘The Battle of Britain Sold Out’, 29 Mar 1941, p. 1.

²⁸ *Daily Express*, ‘The First Great Air Battle in History’, 31 Mar 1941, p. 4; ‘They Lost 7-1’, 1 Apr 1941, p. 2; ‘800 Aircraft Attacked our Fighter Airfields’, 2 Apr 1941, p. 4; ‘The Sky Blossomed with Parachutes’, 3 Apr 1941, p. 2; ‘Enemy Pilots knew they were No Match for Us’, 8 Apr 1941, p. 4; ‘These Man Saved England’, 9 Apr 1941, p. 4.

imprint in November 1941, and an enterprising clothing manufacturer reproduced photographs from the original on a range of silk scarves.²⁹ The pamphlet was also re-published in full or in part by *Flight* magazine, Hutchinson's *Pictorial History of the War*, the *Journal of Royal United Service Institution*, Odham's *War in Pictures* and John Hammerton's *The War Illustrated*.³⁰

The Ministry of Information also helped the pamphlet to gain a global audience. Its press handout was made available to non-British newspapers and plans for serialisation were discussed from the outset.³¹ Deciding to concentrate efforts on the illustrated version, the Ministry used the expertise of its Foreign Division to produce foreign language versions and negotiate licences for the English language original. In India, eight 'vernacular editions' were published under the Ministry of Information's 'War in Pictures' imprint; while, in the United States, the publishers Doubleday Doran were given permission to reproduce an extended version for 25 cents.³² Versions were also produced in Australia, Canada, India, South Africa, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Latin America, Egypt and the Middle East. These editions were supported by a publicity effort co-ordinated by the Ministry of Information's overseas staff. Attuned to the market in their respective territories, they helped to inform decisions surrounding distribution, not least whether the pamphlet should be sold or distributed freely. In China, for instance, 35,000 copies in Chinese were distributed for free, while a smaller number of English language copies were sold through trade channels in Shanghai.³³

This experience was used to redefine the government's publishing policy. In the Air Ministry, Saunders was put in charge of a new branch of the Directorate of Public Relations, and began to appoint other creative writers.³⁴ At an interdepartmental level, it was agreed that the Ministry of Information's Publications Division should be made responsible for publishing all future accounts of war topics on behalf of the 'sponsoring' department concerned.³⁵ These Official War Books would be designed to be preserved by the reader, but would consciously be aimed at a mass market more common to a newspaper or magazine. The proposal was ambitious. Indeed, Fraser believed that each book would need to sell in the 'hundreds of thousands' if they were to have an impact. For this reason, the titles were to be cheap, their content was to be 'dramatic, human, [and] lively', and each was to be illustrated with photographs and drawings. The books would, in Fraser's view, have to use 'pictures so as to become two books in one', with images providing 'a continuous story for those who will not read continuous text'.³⁶ The style he and Parrish adopted was later described by the Minister of Information as the print equivalent of documentary film-making.³⁷ Their aim was to produce nothing less than 'propaganda bestsellers'.³⁸

The Official War Books produced by the Ministry of Information after 1941 each passed through the same three-month editorial process.³⁹ An initial brief was first agreed with the sponsoring department

²⁹ TNA, STAT 14/226, Candler to HMSO, 29 May 1941; Parrish to Plumbley 7 Apr 1941; 'The Battle of Britain: Editions in Volume Form', 9 Apr 1942 and Bodman to Milner, 6 Jun 1941.

³⁰ TNA, STAT 14/226, White to Hutchinson's, 7 Apr 1941; 'The Battle of Britain: Newspaper Supplements and Serialisation', 9 Apr 1941 and Campion, *The Battle of Britain*, p. 95.

³¹ TNA, STAT 14/226, [Parrish], 'The Battle of Britain: Distribution and Publicity Arrangements', 4 Apr 1941.

³² TNA, STAT 14/226, 'Battle of Britain: Editions in Volume Form', 9 Apr 1942.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ TNA, AIR 20/2950, Peake, 'Progress Report for the nine months ended September 30th 1941', 12 Oct 1941, p. 2. Those recruited to PR 11 included H.E. Bates and John Pudney.

³⁵ TNA, INF 1/123, [Parrish], 'Procedure for Pamphlets Edited by the Division', 12 May 1941.

³⁶ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

³⁷ *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 5th Ser., Vol. 401, 29 Jun 1944, cc. 822-23.

³⁸ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

³⁹ Irving, 'Publishing and the Ministry of Information', pp. 65-7.

and a provisional title agreed. A professional writer would then be employed to produce a draft (the usual fee being just £50 for a completed manuscript). Once the manuscript was completed in draft, the author would be released from contract, the content would be cleared by the Ministry's security censors, and the anonymous manuscript would be given to the Publications Division for final preparation. The Division's editorial team would first set out the text in proof, before selecting relevant maps, diagrams, and photographs from the Ministry's image library. These components were brought together by the Division's production team, before a Photostat was passed back to the editorial team for captioning.⁴⁰ Once the captions were complete, final proofs were sent to Fraser for approval, before being passed to HMSO for printing. The entire process was designed to allow for the seamless combination of image and prose. The result, it was claimed, was an entirely 'new kind of book'.⁴¹

'Propaganda Bestsellers'

Sales records compiled by the Ministry of Information provide one measure of the Publications Division's success. Unfortunately for the historian, there remains some confusion regarding *The Battle of Britain*, as the sheer number of editions resulted in contemporary misreporting. In December 1941, for instance, Fraser claimed that 4.8 million copies had been sold in the United Kingdom, although HMSO recorded that only 2.1 million copies of the original and 2.25 million copies of the illustrated version had been printed.⁴² The most complete set of data found to date shows that at least 6,049,625 copies (excluding serialisations) had been produced worldwide by April 1942.⁴³ Although the existence of later editions cannot be ruled out, this suggests some claims have been exaggerated – not least the indeterminate suggestion that 15 million copies were sold worldwide.⁴⁴ When compared to contemporary publications, however, the figures also demonstrate just how successful *The Battle of Britain* was. For comparison, the most popular wartime Penguin Specials sold around 100,000 copies each, the controversial polemic *Guilty Men* had sold 200,000 copies in May 1940, and the best-selling novel *How Green was my Valley* sold 2 million copies in 1939-40.⁴⁵ The only comparable government publication was the September 1939 'Blue Book' of diplomatic exchanges between Britain and Germany – and that had only sold 450,000.⁴⁶

Subsequent records show that no other Official War Book was able to generate sales as large as those enjoyed by *The Battle of Britain*. But this is not to suggest that the series was unsuccessful. By December 1944, nine titles had individually sold over a million copies, and total sales had topped 26 million.⁴⁷ Although they must be treated with the same care as those relating to *The Battle of Britain*, some of the figures for domestic sales are particularly striking. The weighty *Bomber Command*, which was 120 pages long, heavily illustrated, and originally priced at 1s/6d, sold 1.36 million copies in a little

⁴⁰ These were designed to balance precision with informality and were Day-Lewis's most cherished task, see Day-Lewis, *C. Day-Lewis*, p. 138.

⁴¹ *The Times*, 'Mr Max Parrish', 3 Mar 1970, p. 12.

⁴² TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1 and STAT 14/226, 'Battle of Britain: Editions in Volume Form', 9 Apr 1942.

⁴³ TNA, STAT 14/226, 'Battle of Britain: Editions in Volume Form', 9 Apr 1942.

⁴⁴ Anthony James, *Informing the People* (London, HMSO, 1996), p. 24.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Joicey, 'A Paperback Guide to Progress: Penguin Books, 1935-c.1951', *Twentieth Century British History*, 4:1 (1993), 23-56 (p. 34) and Valerie Holman, *Print for Victory: Book Publishing in Britain, 1939-45* (London, British Library, 2008), p. 28.

⁴⁶ Plans for an illustrated version of the 'Blue Book' were pursued by the Ministry of Information in September 1939, but were hindered by interdepartmental disputes and abandoned in favour of an ill-received abridged edition. See Irving, 'Publishing and the Ministry of Information', p. 57.

⁴⁷ TNA, INF 1/942, Reference Division, 'Ministry of Information: Functions and Organisation at 31 December 1944', 31 Dec 1944, p. 6.

over a month following its publication in October 1941.⁴⁸ *Front Line*, which told the story of the Blitz from the perspective of Britain's Civil Defence services, sold 1.88 million copies in 1942 (it would remain the second most popular title). *The Battle of Egypt*, which employed an experimental magazine format, sold 1.48 million copies.⁴⁹ And Britain's victory at El-Alamein, recounted in *The Eighth Army*, sold 1.1 million copies in its first print and around 500,000 in its second. Even the more prosaic books *Make Do and Mend* and *Income Tax Quiz* sold over a million copies each. At the end of the 1943-44 financial year, it was estimated that the Official War Books had made a £30,000 profit for the government, making them a notable commercial success.⁵⁰

Image 2: *Bomber Command* the Air Ministry's Account of Bomber Command's Offensive Against the Axis, September. 1939-July, 1941 (London: HMSO, 1941) [124 p.]

It should also be stressed that – like *The Battle of Britain* – later Official War Books had an audience beyond the United Kingdom. Most titles were sold throughout the British Commonwealth, some were translated into languages other than English, and others were licenced for commercial publication overseas. The best-selling *Front Line*, for example, was published in the United States by Macmillan Ltd and translated into French, Italian, Russian, and Arabic. The dramatic *Combined Operations* (a history of the Commandos written anonymously by Hilary Saunders) was similarly successful. Selected by the Book of the Month Club, it was reproduced in hardback, given a foreword by Lord Louis Mountbatten, and sold 350,000 copies in the United States.⁵¹ In fact, such was the level of interest in the United States, the Ministry of Information revealed Saunders to be the author and sent him on a sponsored lecture tour to 'explain how these official books came to be written'.⁵²

Those responsible for the series were certainly keen to herald its success. For example, in a 1944 report to the Brendan Bracken (the Minister of Information), George Royds (You might have to remind readers who Royds was?) claimed that the public had taken the Official War Books 'to its heart'.⁵³ Significantly, his report was quoted by Bracken during a Parliamentary debate on the Ministry's expenditure, which used 'the pleasant subject of books' to present a picture of success at home and abroad.⁵⁴ Historians, too, have tended to accept high sales figures as evidence that the Ministry's books influenced opinion. Yet, the link between commercial success and influence must be treated with care, as sales figures alone do not show how the books were read or received. These points were particularly important for books that aspired to be '*propaganda* bestsellers' and the next section tests them in greater depth.

Defining the Readership

An analysis of the influence of the Official War Books must rest upon an understanding of their readership. This is made possible, for the United Kingdom, at least, by the use of market research data produced by the government Wartime Social Survey (WSS) and material collected by the social research organisation Mass Observation. In 1943, the WSS was directly commissioned by Fraser to undertake an investigation into the Official War Books. Its findings were based on interviews with a random sample of 6,000 people undertaken by fifty-five trained field workers, and were regarded as

⁴⁸ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

⁴⁹ TNA, INF 1/75, Fraser to Royds, 28 Apr 1943.

⁵⁰ TNA, INF 1/76, Fraser, 'Publications Division, 1943-44', 25 Mar 1944.

⁵¹ *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 5th Ser., Vol. 401, 29 Jun 1944, cc. 822-25.

⁵² Saunders, *Pioneers!*, pp. 7-19.

⁵³ TNA, INF 1/76, Royds, 'Draft Submission to the Minister', 23 Jun 1943.

⁵⁴ *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 5th Ser., Vol. 401, 29 Jun 1944, cc. 822-25.

an exemplar of quantitative social research.⁵⁵ Mass Observation's qualitative studies were more idiosyncratic and often struggled under the weight of material collected by its observers. Nevertheless, the organisation, which worked closely with the Ministry at the beginning of the war, was responsible for one of the most extensive studies of reading ever undertaken in Britain. Beginning in 1939, it used evidence from publishers, book clubs, libraries and book sellers to produce a series of reports on popular reading habits. In 1942 and 1944, these reports were combined with ethnographic observation and indirect questioning in two ambitious surveys that claimed to consider the reading habits of 10,000 individuals. Their objective was to 'give a picture of the whole anatomy of book reading', which make the investigations a useful point of comparison to the WSS.⁵⁶

The evidence demonstrates that the Second World War saw increased reading. Despite practical difficulties effecting publishers, such as paper rationing, Mass Observation recorded growing levels of reading and increased library usage. In the simplest example, the number of respondents claiming to read 'a lot' rose from 40 per cent in 1942 to 58 per cent in 1944 (although it was recognised that this jump was likely to have been exaggerated by a change to the wording of the question).⁵⁷ These trends began early in the war. Indeed, in an unconnected study, the British Institute of Public Opinion had found that 62 per cent of people were reading either a book or magazine in February 1940.⁵⁸ Mass Observation concluded that reading had emerged as an inexpensive way to alleviate the monotony of the Blackout as opportunities for other leisure activities had been curtailed.⁵⁹ Taking a broader perspective, the 'reading boom' can also be seen as a result of longer-term trends, for instance the growth of lower middle and working class readers, and the rapid expansion of magazines and paperbacks during the interwar years.⁶⁰ In either case, the boom suggested that there was a potentially captive audience for the Official War Books. But who were the Ministry of Information's readership?

Image 3: *Coastal Command* The Air Ministry account of the part played by Coastal Command in the battle of the seas 1939-1942 (London: HMSO, 1942) [143 p.]

The WSS deliberately excluded *The Battle of Britain* from its investigation because of the risk that it would skew results. Nevertheless, an impressive 56 per cent of its sample claimed to have seen at least one of the six titles included (*Bomber Command*, *Front Line*, *Coastal Command*, *The Battle of Egypt*, *East of Malta*, *West of Suez*, and *Combined Operations*), and 26 per cent claimed to have seen three or more.⁶¹ This suggested that the circulation figure for each book could be as high as five times the number of recorded sales (if this did apply to the 4.35 million copies of *The Battle of Britain* known to have been printed by HMSO, then Saunders' first pamphlet could conceivably have been seen by over 20 million people). The WSS was, however, interested in more than raw circulation figures. Its primary aim was to better understand the Ministry's audience. It found that men were more likely to have seen the books than women; that there was a wider audience among the young than the old; that those with higher incomes were more likely to be readers; and that those with a higher level of education were more likely to have seen multiple titles. The report concluded that 'The audience for

⁵⁵ Kathleen Box and Geoffrey Thomas, 'The Wartime Social Survey', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 77:3-4 (1944), 151-189 (pp. 171-74).

⁵⁶ MO, FR 1332, 'Report on Books and the Public', 2 Jul 1942 and FR 2018, 'Books and the Public', 11 Feb 1944.

⁵⁷ It is now thought that levels of readership grew by nearer 10 per cent. Andrew Black, *The Public Library in Britain, 1914-2000* (London, British Library, 2000), p. 86.

⁵⁸ James McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914-1950* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 74.

⁵⁹ MO, FR 47, Box, 'Book Reading in Wartime', Mar 1940.

⁶⁰ McAleer, *Popular Reading*, ch. 2.

⁶¹ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', June-July 1943, p. 3.

MOI books is to some extent the same as the audience for illustrated magazines ... and small topical books of the Penguin non-fiction type'.⁶² Mass Observation put it rather more succinctly as the 'sort of books M30B [Male, 30s, upper middle class] buy'.⁶³

The Attraction of Official War Books

Both the WSS and Mass Observation aimed to uncover the attraction of books to their audience. The WSS used the final part of its investigation to ask the 1,351 interviewees who claimed to have bought an Official War Book a series of open questions about their choice. They recorded a variety of responses. Some of the interviewees (13 per cent of the total) expressed a particular interest in an individual pamphlet because friends or family had been involved in the events described. Others had bought to give as presents (8 per cent) or to keep as a record (7 per cent). Still smaller numbers had bought one of the pamphlets 'because everyone was reading them' (4 per cent), or on impulse (2 per cent). Nevertheless, the most popular reason given for purchasing an Official War Book – given by 68 per cent of interviewees – was simply due to 'general interest'.⁶⁴ This finding echoed an earlier conclusion drawn by Mass Observation's organiser Tom Harrisson. In October 1941, he had signed a petition encouraging the government to support war writers because of the public's 'demand for books about the lives which other people are leading'.⁶⁵

A popular demand for information can be seen clearly in the case of *The Battle of Britain*. Newspaper and broadcast coverage of the aerial war had gained a mixed response during summer 1940. Initial reports struggled to contextualise sporadic attacks, with Mass Observation detecting a 'feeling that there [was] too much repetition of similar items'.⁶⁶ Censorship restrictions, which removed anything that might be of use to the enemy (including locations, exact times, and even reports of weather conditions), also encouraged disbelief regarding aircraft losses. As the battle developed, the Ministry of Information's Home Intelligence division found much 'evidence of people's doubts about the news' and poetically concluded that 'without interpretation and explanation vague suspicions grow'.⁶⁷ Although covered by exactly the same restrictions, Saunders was keen to stress that he had been granted access to material 'denied to the man in the street'.⁶⁸ His message was amplified by the Ministry of Information's decision to stress *The Battle of Britain*'s novelty in pre-publication publicity. Released just five months after the events it described, the pamphlet was certainly timely. This fact alone led Mass Observation to commend the Air Ministry for being 'ahead of other Ministries in appreciating the value of public understanding' (though this was no doubt aided by the fact that it could tell the first 'good news' of the war).⁶⁹

Those involved in the series were, nevertheless, aware that it was not enough to have a story to tell. One of Mass Observation's primary criticisms of those books about the war published before 1941

⁶² TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', pp. 3 and 20.

⁶³ Mass Observation, FR 1332, 'Books and the Public', p. 56.

⁶⁴ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', p. 15. Men were more likely to describe 'general interest' than women (76 per cent compared to 55 per cent), who tended to explain their purchases as a result of particular interest due to the involvement of a loved one (20 per cent for women compared to 9 per cent for men) or because they intended to give the book as a present (15 per cent compared to a miserly 4 per cent). The percentages add to more than 100 as some interviewees gave more than one response.

⁶⁵ MO, FR 894, Harrisson *et al*, 'Why Not War Writers', 1 Oct 1941. This petition was published in the influential literary magazine *Horizon* in October 1941.

⁶⁶ MO, FR 261, Harrisson, 'Air Propaganda', 11 Jul 1940, p. 21.

⁶⁷ Paul Addison and Jeremy Crang, eds, *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports on Britain's Finest Hour – May to September 1940* (London, Vintage, 2011), 10 Aug 1940, p. 316 and 14 Aug 1940, p. 327.

⁶⁸ Saunders, *Pioneers!*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ MO, FR 968, Harrisson, 'War Books', 20 Nov 1941, p. 12 and Campion, *The Battle of Britain*, p. 92.

was that they were often poorly written. In a memorable broadside against secrecy within the service departments, Harrison claimed that ‘the men who could write books couldn’t get the material, [while] the men who could get the material couldn’t write the books’.⁷⁰ The use of professional writers helped most Official War Books to avoid such criticism. The ambition was to be ‘informative without being dull’.⁷¹ The use of specially-commissioned graphics (which included maps, plans, cut-away diagrams, and tables of data) served a similar purpose. The WSS found that these techniques were highly appreciated. Indeed, when the sample was asked to identify particular things that they liked about the books, 29 per cent mentioned clarity, 17 per cent referred to the diagrams, and 10 per cent the production and writing.⁷² Price was also an important factor. *The Battle of Britain* had been priced at 6d to compete with commercial paperbacks, and even the more expensive later titles were ‘affordable’ at a time when other opportunities for spending were constrained. In the WSS survey, only 6 per cent of people who had not bought one of the titles referred to cost as a prohibiting factor.⁷³ Saunders maintained that the books brought events ‘to the knowledge of the largest number of people at the lowest possible cost’.⁷⁴

Image 4: A typical explanatory diagram from *The Battle of Britain*

As had been the case with *The Battle of Britain*, the Publications Division also worked hard to ensure that later titles became the subject of ‘newspaper and radio publicity’ in their own right.⁷⁵ The pamphlets were often trailed in the press and sometimes tied to other outputs. *Coastal Command*, for instance, was released shortly after a documentary film of the same name in 1942. Other titles were adapted from BBC radio broadcasts. For example, the Air Ministry-sponsored *We Speak from the Air*, was a collection of talks by RAF personnel (its success led to a sequel entitled *Over to You*). The outward appearance of the books was considered with similar care. Parrish understood that each would ‘sell on its merits’ and used striking cover designs, clear fonts, and bold colours to attract readers.⁷⁶ The WSS found that people who had not previously seen the pamphlets tended to comment favourably on their aesthetic qualities, concluding that ‘the get up ... seen at close quarters is very attractive’.⁷⁷ These strategies emulated the inter-war publishing techniques that underpinned the wartime ‘reading boom’, and seemed to attract first time readers. The WSS found that 28 per cent of its sample had first heard about the titles they had read on the radio, and 19 per cent had read about them in a newspaper.⁷⁸ This was perhaps testament to the tendency of lower middle and working class readers to disproportionately buy books that had been adapted or serialised.⁷⁹

Although publicity and production undoubtedly helped the books’ popularity, the WSS maintained that ‘general interest’ was statistically more important. Indeed, its 1943 survey found that the most popular reason for reading an Official War Book was the desire to gain a better understanding of the war. When it asked about the books’ primary benefits, the WSS found that 31 per cent of readers thought the books ‘brought home’ particular events, 27 per cent thought that they provided an understanding of Britain’s overall war effort, and 11 per cent thought they ‘demonstrated the way the British people had faced [the war]’. Another 12 per cent claimed that they ‘contained more

⁷⁰ MO, FR 894, Harrison *et al*, ‘Why Not War Writers’, 1 Oct 1941, p. 3.

⁷¹ Saunders, *Pioneers!*, p. 17.

⁷² TNA, RG 23/42, ‘MOI Publications’, p. 26.

⁷³ TNA, RG 23/42, ‘MOI Publications’, p. 12.

⁷⁴ *The Times*, ‘Letter to the Editor: Government Books’, 3 Feb 1943, p. 5.

⁷⁵ TNA, 1/123, Fraser, Books and Pamphlets Programme’, 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

⁷⁶ TNA, STAT 14/226 Parrish to Plumbly, 28 Mar 1941.

⁷⁷ TNA, RG 23/42, ‘MOI Publications’, p. 11.

⁷⁸ TNA, RG 23/42, ‘MOI Publications’, p. 16.

⁷⁹ McAleer, *Popular Reading*, p. 87.

information than the press'. The report's author concluded that the series had 'largely served its purpose' and had succeeded in making 'a complicated war effort more real and understandable' to its readers.⁸⁰ This was reiterated by Saunders, who described the Official War Books as 'a mirror' that allowed 'the passer-by [to] see [the] manner of world he lives in and [the] strange events he is helping to shape'.⁸¹ This was helped by their design and narrative style, but it relied upon something much more intangible: the books' ability to transcend their propagandistic origins.

In Saunders' view, a pamphlet that 'describ[ed] contemporary events' would only be believed if it bore 'the hallmark of truth'. He understood that censorship made it impossible to give all of the details, but was adamant that 'not one of [the pamphlets] contains a lie'.⁸² Although it is now known that the series contains a number of inaccuracies, the Official War Books told the truth as it was known at the time, provided that it could be published without assisting the enemy. The books did not shy away from casualties or defeats. Stylistically, too, this 'sensible propaganda' was deliberately unsensational: it was *Front Line* and *The Battle of Egypt*, not 'We Can Take It' or 'Desert Victory'.⁸³ This documentary approach to 'contemporary history' was widely praised by contemporaries. Even the usually sceptical Harrison commended it as 'an intelligent attempt to interpret past experiences simply and truthfully, without a lot of bally-hoo or back-patting'.⁸⁴ After lobbying for *The Battle of Britain* to be used as a model for future work, Mass Observation would later commend the Official War Books as 'first-class jobs of documentation'.⁸⁵

Trust was furthered by the designation of an 'Official' status that had been denied to publications under the Ministry of Information's earlier policy of facilitation and promotion. While not despatches or official histories, the Official War Books were attributed to the British government rather than an individual author, and the series was generally reserved 'for the great national stories'.⁸⁶ Saunders described this policy with reference to the idea of a 'people's war', noting that:

Our leaders do not cease to proclaim that this is a people's war ... [and] have recognized that it is their duty to keep the peoples they rule and lead informed of the progress of the war in its various aspects.⁸⁷

As Ian McLaine has shown, the Ministry of Information as a whole moved from an exhortatory to an explanatory tone during 1941-45. An increasing scepticism about the influence of propaganda, a renewed confidence in morale, and a growing faith in the public's ability to see the war in perspective resulted in a loosening of censorship and expansion of documentary techniques during these years.⁸⁸ These developments owed much to Bracken, who believed exhortation bred resentment, and that 'a blind-folded democracy is more likely to fall than to fight'.⁸⁹ The fact that *The Battle for Britain* was published before Bracken's appointment suggests, though, that they began at the Ministry's lower levels before they were adopted at the top.

⁸⁰ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', pp. 25-6.

⁸¹ Saunders, *Pioneers!*, p. 8.

⁸² Saunders, *Pioneers!*, p. 15.

⁸³ Connelly, *We Can Take It*, pp. 211-12.

⁸⁴ MO, FR 633, Harrison, 'Need for an Offensive Morale', 4 Apr 1941.

⁸⁵ MO, FR 968, Harrison, 'War Books', 20 Nov 1941, p. 12.

⁸⁶ TNA, INF 1/76, [Report on] 'Publications Division, 1943-44', 25 Mar 1944.

⁸⁷ Saunders, *Pioneers!*, pp. 8-9.

⁸⁸ Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1979), pp. 250-1.

⁸⁹ TNA, CAB 66/23, Bracken, 'Propaganda at Home', 10 Apr. 1942, p. 2.

Measuring Influence

The documentary technique used in the Official War Books had two inter-related objectives. The first was to boost the standing of Britain's war effort in the mind of the reader by providing 'information about achievement'. The second was to use this information to stimulate additional effort from the reader through the 'evocation of team spirit'.⁹⁰ Fraser recognised that 'the book is not an easy medium of propaganda', but the Ministry of Information was nevertheless determined to gain an active response, because it believed morale was 'ultimately measured not by what a person thinks or says, but by what he does and how he does it'.⁹¹ This definition of morale was difficult to measure, and neither the WSS nor Mass observation were unable to gauge the influence of the Official War Books with any accuracy. Yet their surveys do include some intriguing hints.

The most successful of the titles identified by the WSS was the Department of Home Security-sponsored *Front Line*. This lavish account of civil defence had been written by S.C. Leslie (the Home Office's director of public relations) and was the book that sold 1.88 million in 1942. It begins with the first bomb in October 1939, covers the 'onslaught of London', 'ordeal of the provinces' and the 'drip bombing' of coastal areas during 1940-41, and ends with a detailed section explaining the techniques used in response to a raid. The book's unifying theme is the 'achievement of the many'. This is again encouraged by the omission of names, although the reader is placed much closer to the heart of the story than had been the case in *The Battle of Britain*. The WSS found that *Front Line* was particularly liked by people who expressed a 'general interest', and commended Leslie's balance of action and analysis.⁹² Attempts to link domestic effort with campaigns overseas were less successful. The WSS found that even high-selling titles like *Bomber Command* and *Combined Operations* appealed primarily to 'enthusiasts', while many women and manual workers remained disengaged.⁹³

Image 5: An internal spread from *Front Line, 1940-1941 The Official Story of the Civil Defence of Britain* (London: HMSO, 1942) [161 p.]

There are other examples of failings and difficulty. For instance, *East of Malta, West of Suez* (an Admiralty account of its activities in the Mediterranean) was singled out by the WSS for being 'least popular amongst all groups', despite its author being a seasoned writer on Naval Affairs.⁹⁴ Mass Observation's findings also suggest that interest waned as the market became saturated. This was particularly evident among groups who were already under-represented, with some female respondents adamant that they 'would never read a war book' and newsagents noting that some working class customers were 'sick and tired of books that have anything to do with the war' by 1944.⁹⁵ Impact was questioned in literary circles, too. George Orwell, for example, decried *The Battle of Britain* for failing to rise above 'German lies' and thought it should 'simply give a cold, accurate account of the facts'.⁹⁶ Potentially more serious criticism was levelled by commercial publishers and agents who were angry at the Ministry of Information's ability to access large quantities of scarce paper. Valerie

⁹⁰ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 2.

⁹¹ TNA, INF 1/292, [Taylor], 'Home Morale and Public Opinion', p. 1.

⁹² TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', pp. 27-8.

⁹³ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', p. 3 and 35.

⁹⁴ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', p. 35 and James, *Informing the People*, p. 61.

⁹⁵ MO, FR 2018, 'Books and the Public', 11 Feb 1944, p. 78.

⁹⁶ George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Vol II. My Country Left or Right* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968), diary 8 Apr 1941, p. 391.

Holman's work on the wartime relationship between publishers and the state has shown that such criticism was symbolic of broader unease about unfair competition and state control.⁹⁷

However, if imitation is a form of flattery, commercial publishers appear to have viewed the Official War Books as the start of a new market. In 1944, for example, Odhams Ltd published an illustrated hardback entitled *Warfare Today* that adopted many of the techniques honed by its former-employees Fraser and Parrish.⁹⁸ Other organisations produced accounts of their work in a similar style. London County Council, for instance, published the poorly written, but dramatically illustrated *Fire Over London*, which gives an account of the Fire Service during the Blitz. The BBC, the General Post Office, and the pre-nationalisation 'British Railways' group were among others bodies to publish similar accounts during the war.⁹⁹ Each of these examples bears testament to the perception of success. The Official War Books' impact on morale might well have been slight, but it was clearly believed that they had shaped British reading habits. By the end of the war, they were simply 'an established part of the country's reading'.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The British Official War Books published between 1941 and 1946 provide an important case study in the history of communication and dissemination. This chapter has shown how the Ministry of Information used the unexpected commercial success of *The Battle of Britain* to hone its approach to publishing. The strategy developed by its Publications Division combined the experience gained in March 1941 with publishing techniques originating during the inter-war period. These techniques made the Official War Books attractive products. When coupled with the wartime 'reading boom' and a popular desire for knowledge, they helped to achieve vast sales and global interest. A history of the Official War Books must look beyond commercial success, however, as each book was a medium for propaganda that aimed to influence opinion and conduct. Although the Ministry's own market research casts doubt upon the latter, it seems that the books did promote a particular vision of the British war effort. This owed much to the use of documentary techniques. By building upon existing perceptions, the books were perceived to be objective, and were thus able to reinforce earlier messages of.... This approach was a hallmark of British propaganda in the later years of the Second World War – and the Official War Books are an example of it at its best.

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⁹⁷ Holman, *Print for Victory*, p. 105. Critics tended not to mention that this system had been designed to ensure publishing houses could stay in business by giving them access to a quota equal to their total paper usage in 1938-39.

⁹⁸ Reginald Bacon *et al*, *Modern Warfare: How Modern Battles are Planned and Fought on Land, at Sea, and in the Air* (London, Odhams, c. 1944).

⁹⁹ James, *Informing the People*, pp. 107-17.

¹⁰⁰ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1 and INF 1/76, Royds, 'Draft Submission to the Minister', 23 Jun 1943.

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